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SMOG IN A TIME OF TOBACCO CONTROL

Sometimes demons can get out of hand and cause mischief. Such a statement can either be taken at face value or with the irony that Fernandez and Huber (2001) argue is inherent in all social anthropology, insofar as anthropology is a product which comes ‘woven, or knotted, in the encounter of different viewpoints’ (Carrithers 2014). This is an anthropological tale of two demons: tobacco (Berridge 2013) and Ravana, the demon king of Sri Lanka in the Hindu pantheon.

Demonic ironies

In November 2016, I spent a week attending the 7th Conference of the Parties (COP7) to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in Greater Noida, a special economic zone near Delhi, India. It coincided with the worst smog ever experienced in the Delhi region. Local people attributed it to the fireworks let off through excessive ebullience at Diwali (festival of lights) the week before, although it is hard to imagine that fireworks alone could be the cause of such a dense and sustained haze (Fig. 1). For others, the smog was more likely to have been caused by the extensive burning of post-harvest rice fields ‘in neighbouring states’ (as one newspaper put it). No one blamed the traffic pollution which had caused a major blanketing of the city the previous winter.

The arrival of approximately 700 delegates from all parts of the world to promote the agenda of tobacco control at COP7 was only one of many ironies posed by the physical reality of the Delhi smog. The FCTC is the first health treaty of its kind aimed at countering the serious respiratory and other diseases caused by tobacco use worldwide. The smog, however, offered a mischievous reminder that tobacco is not the only cause of respiratory illnesses. In the UK in 2012, for example, 28,969 deaths were attributable to long-term exposure to air pollution (Vidal 2015). One could add a zero to this figure to indicate the tenfold higher death rates from tobacco smoking in this and other high-income countries.

Elsewhere in the world, however, indoor pollution from cooking fires and the like is of far greater importance (Salvi & Barnes 2010). Indeed 90 per cent of the victims of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) – set to become the world’s third largest killer disease from 2030 – are in the Global South (WHO 2016). This is the ‘silent epidemic’ (Salvi 2015), obscured in global health policy circles by the far greater attention paid to mortality from malaria, TB and HIV/AIDS (van Gemert et al. 2015).

The smog was not the only form of material obfuscation to be found during the week. COP7 delegates might have noticed, for example, the signs plastered on bus shelters



Fig. 1. Morning smog, Greater Noida.

Fig. 2. Autorickshaw with tobacco livelihood poster, Greater Noida.

and numerous three-wheeler autorickshaws featuring an elderly man in typical north Indian peasant garb with his hands clasped together in a beseeching prayer. ‘Protect our livelihood. I am a tobacco farmer’, the caption read. ‘We appeal to the government to probe and expose the hidden agenda of agencies engaged in anti-tobacco campaigns’ (Fig. 2).

The irony of such a statement would probably have been lost on most non-attendees. For this was no indigenous grassroots campaign, but an example of ‘astroturfing’ (Lyon & Maxwell 2004), the practice whereby large corporations heavily subsidize apparently independent interest groups in the pursuit of their interests. The International Tobacco Growers’ Association is one such well-documented astroturf group, financed almost exclusively by the tobacco industry.

There are certain reasons why production issues have become a fulcrum for demonic activity in international tobacco control. The title of the Article 17 of the FCTC, ‘Provision of support for economically viable alternative activities’, indicates an intention entirely opposed to the destruction of tobacco farmers’ livelihoods. However, it must be said that the alternative livelihoods issue has not been addressed as robustly by the global tobacco control community as have some of the more directly health-focused articles contained in the FCTC. This is due in part to the fact that tobacco growing is not present in every country (unlike its consumption), and to the complexities involved in addressing the multi-layered world of tobacco production, reflected in the necessarily long and complex report on the problem prepared for COP6 (FCTC 2014).

This is about power and semantics as much as geography. Anthropologists, such as Marty Otañez and Pete Benson, have done much to disaggregate and nuance the term ‘tobacco farmer’ and to describe the domination and manipulation of the people included within this



catch-all term (Benson 2012; Otañez & Glantz 2009). However, such critiques tend to lack traction in the mischievous, deceitful world of tobacco politics or neoliberal capitalism.

The failure of the international tobacco control lobby to address the issue adequately has enabled the industry to mobilize people against it, with tobacco being portrayed in the Indian media not only in terms of livelihoods, but also national interest. Tobacco farmers, it has been claimed, contribute an estimated 10,000 crore rupees – 100 billion (about £1.2 billion) – to the Indian economy. The president of the Federation of All India Farmer Associations has been reported in the *Indian Express* as saying ‘they [meaning tobacco control experts] are creating an environment that facilitates the entry of global corporations to manipulate and earn profits from the lucrative Indian market’.

During the conference, police officers with rifles were stationed at the various conference hotels to deal with any lurking miscreants who might emerge from the smog to engage in further debate with the ‘foreign interests’ represented at COP7.

Demons in public

Strange visions and dreams began to occur among NGO representatives. A tobacco control activist representing an NGO spotted

four members of the International Tobacco Growers' Association with their Brazilian leader in a hotel cafe. Another had a dream in which a male delegate from a Central American country who was being particularly difficult over procedural issues at COP7 was shimmying through a market in a beautiful dress, hand-in-hand with a strongly anti-tobacco media representative.

Such dreams and visions were ironic because Article 5.3 of the FCTC, regarded by many as the cornerstone of the convention, states robustly that 'in setting and implementing their public health policies with respect to tobacco control, Parties shall act to protect these policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry in accordance with national law' (WHO 2003: 7).

Far being from an opaque way to facilitate the entry of global corporations into lucrative Indian markets – as the astroturf 'growers' and 'farmers' associations were claiming – the COPs are deliberately run in ways intended to be fully compliant with Article 5.3. The problem is how 'commercial and other vested interests' can be identified. One example is the question of COP attendance by 'members of the public'. 'Members of the public' is a category of person which includes many who represent such interests, either overtly or covertly.

Such was the intimidation felt by the representatives of countries whose ministries have strong links to the tobacco industry that some had previously expressed the opinion that they were unable to speak freely in session if members of the public were in the room, for fear of subsequent recriminations. At COP7, therefore, members of the public were permitted to attend the first plenary session, but were then excluded from the deliberations of the two committees, side meetings, working groups and other fora in which most substantive business of the conference was conducted.

Where such measures had been taken at previous COPs, the layout of the conference venue had meant members of the public could still hang around in the corridors, lunch and coffee venues to engage informally with COP participants. However, the security cordon at the entrance to both the site and building, and the smoggy environment in which COP7 was being held, made such tactics impossible. On day two at COP7, even the sign over the reception desk indicating where members of the public should queue to obtain their day passes had been removed.

Such exclusionary measures might seem astonishing to those unfamiliar with the tobacco industry and its history of counter-tactics against the convention. Yet the release of millions of tobacco industry documents as a result of litigation against the industry in 1990 revealed the extent of the tobacco industry's influence (Assunta & Chapman 2006; Mamudu et al. 2008; Smith et al. 2009; Weishaar et al. 2012).

Demons in tobacco-free spaces

A ritual space free of tobacco had thus been created – or had it? Like the smog, despite the

best efforts of the conference organizers, the influence of the tobacco industry remained pervasive. Even with members of the public excluded from sessions, some party delegations included representatives of national ministries which had a policy mandate to increase tobacco production or consumption rather than reduce it, or which were strongly influenced by the tobacco industry in their country legislatures (e.g. Gilmore et al. 2006; Patel et al. 2007); others had first or business class air travel to COP7 funded through corporate tobacco sources.

This all runs counter to the protection from tobacco industry interests that Article 5.3 is intended to foster and the COPs are supposed to exemplify. The reason for the increased presence of tobacco interests at COP7 was partly the expanded membership of the FCTC (now comprising 181 states or 'parties') with some recent signatories strongly associated with tobacco industry interests. These and other increasingly sophisticated ways in which industry representatives were able to infiltrate the conference meant that COP7 was perhaps more 'difficult', as one NGO representative put it, than former ones.

The infiltration of COP7 by demonic tobacco exudes irony. It was certainly ironic to be in the governing body of global tobacco control and hear some of the claims being publicly aired by certain country delegates. Some of these have long been refuted, such as 'there is no evidence of tobacco industry interference' or 'I don't think we have what is known as a tobacco epidemic in the world right now'. Some suggested, in contravention of both the letter and the spirit of Article 5.3, that tobacco industry and related interests might be legitimate stakeholders in the FCTC.

The consequences were more than simple matters of epistemology, however. They were also about practices and materials. There were deliberate attempts made to slow progress on the key pieces of international legislation being discussed, either by invoking procedural issues or by raising a 'flag' and 'opening up' an issue just at the point when the chair of a committee thought s/he had achieved consensus and was about to 'close' it. Sometimes this could happen just before lunch or the end of the day, giving parties a chance to regroup or, in some cases, to consult with their governments at home and possibly come back with a less flexible 'position'. A less conspiratorial explanation for the machinations that could be observed, however, was that global health diplomacy is 'new diplomacy' (Lee & Smith 2011: 2), involving actors unfamiliar with diplomatic protocols and processes and how to follow them.

It is also possible that a certain complacency had developed amongst tobacco control practitioners that the FCTC articles and their associated guidelines were enough to vanquish the all-too-pervasive tobacco demons. The election of Donald Trump as US president on the second day of COP7 was in many ways a wake-up call, with demons of a different sort unleashed amongst political liberals in the USA.

On the same day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a demonetization of the Indian economy, pulling 1,000 and 500 rupee notes out of circulation in an attempt to root out an opaque but powerful black market. The money issue led to large lines of delegates waiting to change their notes into something usable at a makeshift State Bank of India office set up on the ground floor of the conference venue. In the neighbouring Ansal Plaza shopping centre, much longer queues formed at ATMs previously only too willing to let money flow.

It is necessary to step back from the immediate COP7 'scene' and see the venue in the context of a greater whole. Greater Noida is part of the increasingly large metropolitan sprawl that is Delhi's 'National Capital Region'. It is a special economic zone, one of the erstwhile economic miracles intended to make cash flows at places such as the Ansal Plaza possible, at least for some (Cross 2014). Ironically, the farmers accusing the FCTC of undermining their livelihoods were doing so at a site that was only in existence due to large-scale acquisitions of agricultural land in the previous decades by a government hell-bent on the creation of an archetypal 'dream zone' (ibid.) marked by an 'extension' and vehicle expressway between Delhi and Agra. The India Expo Centre and Mart where COP7 took place was a jewel in the crown of the special economic zone. Might not such a classic example of supermodern 'non-places' (Augé 1995) be an ideal environment for demonic proliferation? Might these activities have a mythological counterpart and might the two demonic realms be linked in some ways? If so, how?

The anger of Ravana

The village which lost the largest percentage of land in the special economic zone 'land grab' (40 per cent) was Birsakh (Rajput 2012), only a few kilometres away from the conference venue and, according to local folklore, the birthplace of the demon king Ravana. It is his defeat by Ram which is celebrated annually at the Dussehra and Diwali (also called Ramlila) festivals. As mentioned above, the fireworks were widely regarded as one of the possible causes of the smog permeating COP7. In Birsakh, however, the inhabitants were said to go into mourning for Ravana during Diwali rather than celebrating his death, respecting his status as a son of their soil.

Various terrible events were attributed to transgressions of these rituals of respect or mourning. According to the keeper of the old Ravana temple 'they once tried celebrating Ramlila here, but unspeakable sorrow befell them. It stopped thereafter' (Hafeez 2014). The village head reported 'we had, 40-50 years ago, tried to break the tradition [of not celebrating Dussehra] by organizing two Ramlilas and other festivities. But as the villagers burnt Ravana's effigy, the man who was playing Laxman suddenly died. The following year, after celebrating Dussehra, the artiste who had played Ram died. Since then, villagers have stopped celebrating Dussehra and Ramlila' (Rajput 2015).

There is an inherent irony in the notion that villagers invert the ritual celebrations observed elsewhere in order to respect a demon, although the notion that they go in for full-blown mourning or even mourning on the day itself has been rather overplayed by some media outlets. A village resident told one recent visitor 'we do everything [else for Diwali] but do not burn or harm the figure of Ravana' (Jain 2016). 'Ravana was a tragic hero, not a demon' said another. She mourns Ravana simply, in her eyes, by not cooking food in her house on the day of Dussehra (Hafeez 2014). The majority, on the other hand, 'certainly do not mourn the day and celebrate these ten days in full flow which includes buying new clothes and making new dishes everyday' (Jain 2016).

A striking photograph of Ravana's temple in Bistrakh clearly shows the encroachment of the high-rise condominiums that are such an imposing feature of the supermodernity of Greater Noida (Fig. 3). Young people are turning away from Ravana in order to celebrate Diwali elsewhere. 'I did not go to the temple for the morning puja. Almost nothing happens in our village while others around celebrate. I will be going with my friends to Ghaziabad to watch the Ramlila in the evening', a newspaper article quoted one 26-year-old young man as saying (Hafeez 2014). Ironic then to see the destruction of Ravana's statue on 9 August 2016 by 'a group of right wing activists' opposed to the installation of Ravana's idol at a second, Radha Krishan temple that was under construction (Hindustan Times 2016) (Fig. 4). The reasons for such an act are lost in the smoke and mirrors of Hindu nationalist politics. 'We already have a historic temple of Ravana in the village. Some villagers were trying to put an idol of Ravana and other deities related to him at the Radha Krishan temple, which was opposed by some residents. This might have led to the incident', one villager is quoted as saying, obliquely (ibid.).

Conclusion

I have presented the events in and beyond COP7 as a series of ironically interwoven encounters – the smog pervading a conference on tobacco control; the authentically inauthentic tobacco farmer in the heart of a special economic zone; the permeation of the FCTC by tobacco industry interests; the election of Donald Trump and the demonization of the Indian economy; the encroachment, neglect and despoiling of the birthplace of the demon king Ravana, the fireworks celebrating his death and thus, possibly, the smog. If there is a lesson to be garnered from weaving or knotting together what might seem at first sight such a disparate set of tales, it is surely to respect your demons – pay them appropriate obeisance and don't allow them to get out of hand. The consequences of not doing so can be serious.

Perhaps the older inhabitants of Bistrakh got it right. If there is, it is surely that one needs to understand better, acknowledge and make appropriate obeisance to your demons in order

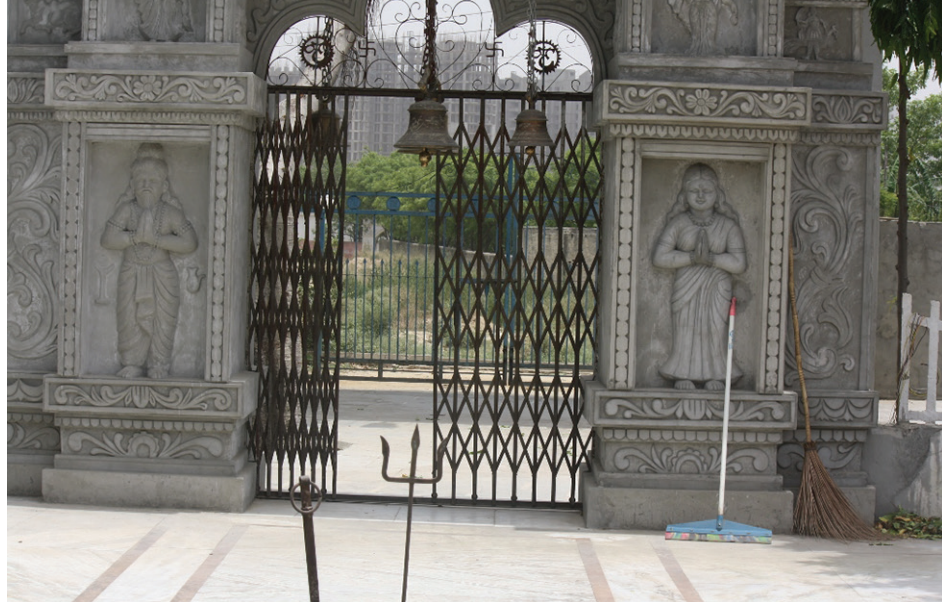


Fig. 3. The Ravana temple, Bistrakh, with high-rise buildings under construction in the background.

Fig. 4. Three of the 10 faces of the Ravana on the ground at the Rada Krishan temple.

for them not to get out of hand. If Bistrakh has a lesson for COP7, it is to respect your demons, or ignore them at your peril. It is one with serious implications for tobacco control and health diplomacy worldwide. ●

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